

Antique Lead Merchants' Weights from the City of London

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WEIGHTS AND MEASURES have, of necessity, been used in some form or other since man first began trading, and over the centuries were made in a variety of materials. Most people, if asked in which metal weights were manufactured in post-medieval England, would probably suggest brass, and antique brass or bronze weights are undoubtedly mainly those that have survived, primarily because of their durability. The round, or disc variety bears certain stamps impressed in the flat top and apart from that showing the actual heaviness, there may be up to four other marks. These are the signs of the city or county whence it originated, the avoirdupois cipher (A), the initial of the monarch in whose reign the weight was made surmounted by a crown, and lastly, the laver, or ewer of the Founders' Company (one of the heraldic bearings on its shield of arms), who were empowered by James I in 1614 to assay and mark all weights of brass, a right they lost only under an act of 1888 which established the London County Council. Old brass weights, then, can be found without difficulty, e.g. in antique markets, but it is perhaps not so well known that similar weights made of lead were simultaneously in common use in former centuries. Although weights of lead, pewter or other soft materials were not actually prohibited by act of parliament until 1835, it is probable that because of the nature of the metal they were always less popular than brass ones.

The first mention of weights used by the Plumbers' Company is in the Ordinance of Edward III, 1365, which directs that 'everyone of the trade shall use lawful weights, as well as in selling as in buying, without any deceit or evil intent against anyone.' However, the earliest specific reference to the stamping of weights is in the year 1491, when a statute of Henry VII decreed that standard weights and measures (of brass) should be delivered to the 'chief officers of the cities, towns and boroughs', who should mark them with a crowned H. This symbol was chosen four years later, in 1495, for all weights used by merchants, which undoubtedly included those of lead.

Although Waldo¹ states that one of the most important early duties of the Plumbers' Company

was the detection of false weights in London and seven miles around, it seems these rights were removed in 1599, 'owing to the fact that leaden weights wore away and became lighter by use, and further, it was alleged, to the excessive charges made by the plumbers. The duty was then assigned to the keeper of the Guildhall, assisted by two members of the Company of Founders, or Coppersmiths, who agreed to carry out the work for a reasonable consideration.' However, the privilege was soon restored to the Plumbers' Company when, in 1611, James I granted it a new Charter which, *inter alia*, authorised 'the control of leaden weights'. It was at this time that the crest of the Plumbers' Company, the angel and scales, was stamped on lead weights assayed by the Plumbers. As the 1611 charter decrees, 'it is unlawful for any Freeman . . . to make or assize any leaden weights, or use same within the City of London, or elsewhere, within three miles of the City unless such weights be proved and impressed with the image of St. Michael, the Archangel, in the Crest of the Plumbers' Company.' St. Michael, holding a pair of scales and a sword, tops the armorial bearing granted to the Plumbers' Company in 1588 by Elizabeth I: — 'And for their Creast, upon a Heaulme on a wreath or and sable, a ffountainne argent, garnished on the toppe with an Archangel holding a sworde and a ballance or, with this their ancient worde or device, Justicia et Pax.'

A further charter was granted to the Company by James II in 1688, at the onset of the Revolution and shortly before his abdication, in exchange for the Charter of James I which, as Waldo puts it, 'had been surrendered under the arbitrary and unconstitutional operation of the writ of quo warranto in 1684 by Charles II'. (The charter of all corporate bodies in England had been annulled by him by the simple expedient of declaring illegal the corporation's freedom of action. This was in order to raise money by fines and make the City Corporation and Livery Companies tools of the Crown.) James II's charter only partially restored the Plumbers' rights

¹ *A Short History of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers*, F J Waldo, 1923 (Master of the Company in 1921).

and it was not until 1690 that a statute of William and Mary fully re-established all the privileges allowed by James I.

There seems to be a small number of these antique lead weights in existence and the writer has been able to trace only fewer than thirty, most of which were made in the City of London, as they bear St. Paul's sword of the City's patron saint (this sword appears on the common seal). The only one known to originate from a place other than the capital, and which was found recently in a garden at Wymondham, Norfolk, is a unique $\frac{1}{2}$ oz example bearing the stamps of Elizabeth I, the A of avoirdupois and the castle and lion of the Norwich arms. It would be interesting to know whether others exist in museums outside the capital relating to provincial cities.

The earliest in date from London is probably of Anglo-Saxon origin, being a fine half-pounder in the Museum of London collection which has another $\frac{1}{2}$ lb weight stamped with a gothic style crowned h but with no other mark. There is an identical 1lb in the British Museum and although the provenance of neither is known they could well be of Henry IV or V vintage. The Science Museum has a crude $\frac{1}{2}$ lb specimen impressed with a crowned M (Mary I). Apart from the Norwich $\frac{1}{2}$ oz there are two other weights of the Elizabethan period, both in the B.M., one of which, a $\frac{1}{4}$ lb, bears St. Paul's sword, the earliest known to do so. The other, a 1lb, roughly square in shape, has a Tudor rose in relief on one side whilst the other, in addition to the crowned EL, is also stamped with a small crowned ER, signifying that it was cast in Edward VI's reign. The following entry for 16 April 1591 from the Book of Letters from the Lords of the City Council shows that the weights were in common use during those years:— 'A letter from the lord mayor and aldermen to the lord high treasurer, containing divers reasons against complying with a request made to him by the Company of Founders, for compelling persons to use brass weights instead of leaden ones.'

There are several known weights of James I (represented by a crowned I) and, as noted earlier, it is on these that the angel and scales stamp first appears in addition to the monarch's symbol. The British Museum collection has two of the $\frac{1}{4}$ lb size with the City sword on them and it is interesting to note that St. Michael is holding his own sword as well as his balances, although only the scales are included from Charles I's reign onwards. Brewer² records that the shop of Messrs De Grave and Co., scale and weight makers in St. Martin's-le-Grand, was formerly known by the sign of the 'Angel and Scales', and the same sign was also adopted at another establishment in this trade, kept by one

Thomas Overing in Bartholomew Lane near the Royal Exchange. Lillywhite in *London Signs* lists the latter, floruit c. 1750, as well as four other 'Angel and Scales' in the City of approximately the same period and it is probable that the Plumbers' Company crest became the trade-mark of scale-makers. St. Michael appears to have been portrayed as both male and female—at any rate on occasion he wears a full skirt, although more usually hose (see photograph of the set of Carolinian weights of $\frac{1}{2}$ lb, 1lb, 2lb and 4lb). Boutell's *Heraldry* notes that Charles I's crown had four crosses paty and also four arches but Charles II reduced the arches to two and depressed them at the point of intersection. This was the form taken by St. Edward's Crown made in his reign to replace the ancient Coronation Crown destroyed during the Commonwealth and intended to be as similar as possible. On this basis the $\frac{1}{2}$ lb and 2lb are of Charles I period and the full crown on the four-pounder relates to Charles II. Nonetheless, as both types of crown figure on farthings and lead seals of James I and Charles I, as they do on crowns of post Restoration coinage of the late 17th/early 18th century, this conclusion has to be accepted with some caution. The rather battered mid-seventeenth century 1lb weight also illustrated is interesting in that in place of the King's initial it bears the City Shield depicting St. George's Cross alongside the sword, and this cross, usually with the sword abbreviated to the appearance of a dagger and placed in the top left-hand corner of the shield, is frequently stamped on brass weights of late Georgian to early Victorian period assayed by the Founders' Company. (The City first used its coat of arms as early as 1319 but the shield of today dates from 1381, the supporters to the cross and sword being originally two lions, becoming dragons in 1609). It may be that the lack of the royal symbol on the 1lb weight indicates a date of manufacture during the Commonwealth.

There are only three later lead weights known to the writer. One is of William III years and in the Museum of London. The W is uncrowned and in place of the angel and scales are three lions passant. Because of the four years' absence of a charter from 1684 there could have been very few, if any, made by the Plumbers in James II's reign. There is also a George I 1lb and $\frac{1}{2}$ lb in the B.M. collection with the St. Michael, and the St. Paul sword stamps being large and elaborate.

The apparently low rate of survival of lead weights is probably accounted for in the main by the fact that, as Waldo notes, being soft, they became unreliable in their accuracy and were smelted down for

2 'On the Antiquity of Marking and Stamping Weights and Measures' by T Brewer, *Journal of the British Archaeological Society*, 1855.



Four lead merchants' weights of Charles I and II period. 1½lb, 1lb, 2lb, 4lb. Scale 2/5.

(Photo: Bawtrees Studios)

re-use of the metal. A considerable number must also have been destroyed by the Great Fire of 1666. The provenance of four of the Museum of London weights is known. Three of Charles I period (one of which appears to have been formed in a two-piece mould) were excavated at Farrington Market, Tooley Street and Yiewsley, Middlesex, respectively and the William III specimen is from Moorgate Street. A few others have been found in recent years beneath the City foreshore of the Thames. The distribution suggests they were standard weights for small quantities of goods used by a variety of merchants, and those from the Thames were probably for weighing merchandise unloaded from ships onto the numerous wharfs along the seventeenth century riverfront. As stated, they were made in sizes of a quarter, a half, one, two and four pounds although the only four-pounder located is that illustrated. Heavier ones were produced, at any rate in former centuries, as shown by an Ordinance of 1488 issued by Henry VII to the Company. This directed 'every plumber in the City to have in his house a hundred, a half-hundred, a quarter of a hundred, a seven pound, a four pound, a two pound, and one pound weight, sealed with the seal of the Guildhall. These weights to be used by the Wardens to compare with other weights in the same house.'

Perhaps the last word should be reserved for the recitations of the Lord mayor's warrant contained in

a book entitled *Lex Londiniensis* and published in 1680, which showed how seriously the authorities regarded merchants who resorted to sharp practice (and clearly lead weights were more suspect than most). The warrant declares that 'great abuses are and have been committed in the city of London by using and keeping unlawful, unsealed, and unsized weights and measures which are found to be very false and deceitful, and not warrantable by his majesty's laws to be used in buying and selling. It therefore authorises the persons to whom it is addressed to enter into all shops, houses, warehouses, and any other places within the city where any beams, weights, measures, yards, ells and such like shall be suspected to be, and there to try and search the same, whether they be true, just, sealed, and sized, as by the law and statutes of the land they ought to be.'

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